

What on earth is going on in the Netherlands?

"Steek niet met je hoofd boven het maaiveld uit"
"Don't put your head above grass-level"
(Dutch expression)

The meteoric rise of Pim Fortuijn, his shocking murder on May 6th 2002, and the dramatic national election results in the Netherlands on May 15th, left the country and its inhabitants with much to think about. Since then, political upheaval and resettlement. Then, out of the blue, the murder in November 2004 of Theo van Gogh, followed by attacks on mosques, churches, schools, and the high-drama break-up of a terrorist cell in the Hague. Commentators and politicians struggle to find adequate analysis and action.

This article aims to map the deeper undercurrents that were, and still are, at work, and proposes a way of thinking for the future. As a result, may it provide some clarity, so that future conversation and decision-making may be better informed, within all sectors and at all levels of society.

Act One : Pre May 6th

The Netherlands is a stable country. Economic well-being on the one hand, and the common enemy of the sea on the other, released energy to focus on co-operation and inclusiveness. Consensus decision-making is an important part of institutional life, and respect for others is a golden rule. The social liberalism that is so present in the perceptions that outsiders have of the Dutch (e.g. decriminalisation and legalisation of drugs, prostitution, homo-sexual marriage and euthanasia) is strongly balanced by the institutionalisation of these areas. In legalising them, they fall under the control of government, providing a legislative framework within which these practices are allowed to exist. Co-operation and inclusiveness through government.

The strong Protestant, Calvinist traditions come from a way of thinking that is not actually as opposed to this as one might think. The emphasis again falls on order and rules, and the focus on respect and egalitarianism is reflected in the Calvinist sense of guilt around wealth and excess – the idea that one must not be seen to be extravagant, or promoting oneself in contrast to others who are less well-off. Keeping your head down is an important part of this. This context has meant that the Dutch approach to free-market capitalism has resulted in a strong form of social democracy, where the excesses of neo-liberalism are frowned upon, and individualism is not a thing to be proud of.

This is the world of many of those from the post-war generations – those growing up in the 1950s and 1960s – who now play prominent roles in Dutch society. This is what the life conditions demanded, and this is therefore what

was developed to cope. However, these older coping mechanisms are now proving to be inadequate¹ for the new life conditions that are emerging. That is the nature of change – in solving one set of problems, we sow the seeds for the next set of problems, and so it goes on, for ever, as far as we know.

So what are these new emerging life conditions? They are above all characterised by greater complexity. We are confronted with increasing difference and diversity in our lives, be it through the images beamed into our living rooms from all over the world, through the seemingly endless amounts of information on the internet, or through the wide range of people from different countries and backgrounds who we now meet in our streets. Our more static and homogenous senses of belonging (be they to nation, religion or political ideology) are challenged to become part of more fluid and dynamic identities.

The younger generations are growing up faced with those life conditions, and so are generating new mechanisms to cope. Most have been brought up by parents whose coping mechanisms are as described above – demanding respect for all, sacrifice of oneself for others, and egalitarianism. Having processed that kind of thinking, many younger people now feel a need for something a bit different to deal with the modern day life that they face. This involves a way of thinking that is more expressive of one's self, more proactive in its interaction with the world, not so willing to adapt to the environment around, but more energised to go out and shape the world².

In this article, I refer to two main categories of thinking, "express-self", and "sacrifice-self" – and within these categories there are a number of variations. Express-self ways of thinking (or "systems") tend to express more one's agency as an individual, whereas Sacrifice-self ways of thinking tend to sacrifice one's own individual needs for communion and connection with the group or collective. Express-self ways of thinking see the world more as an environment to use and shape for one's needs – Sacrifice-self ways of thinking see the world as an environment which one should adapt to. Within each category (Express-self and Sacrifice-self) there are ways of thinking that are more and less complex.

Express-self ways of thinking reject the idea that there may be One Truth, don't want to have to obey rules, and see the opportunities that the free market climate, dominant in the world today, has to offer. The last thing they want to do is to submit to some authoritarian order, be it one that is rooted in traditional religion which demands obedience to higher moral and ethical

¹ I use the concept of "adequacy" in this article with reference to its Latin root meaning "equal to" – when our coping mechanisms are more or less equal to the life conditions that we face.

codes, or be it one that demands that you be tolerant of others, politically correct, and humble in your ways.

The more complex of the express-self systems bring a constructive energy to stagnating sacrifice-self systems, and demand change and transformation to meet the new life conditions. However, they also attract and create space for the less complex and more demanding forms of express-self, often seen in the less tolerant voices of radical beliefs and movements. This way of thinking can be seen in movements which may look very different on the surface, but whose underlying drivers are the same, e.g. ethno-centric Dutch nationalism, violent anti-capitalism protesters, exclusivist Islamic movements.

Pim Fortuijn was appealing to the need that people felt for more individual freedom and self-expression, as opposed to the consensus-driven agenda of the political establishment, which demands sacrifice from the individual for the sake of the whole. This latter force is felt as oppressive by many, suffocating the individual and the nation, and repressive of real honest debate about how things are. The Netherlands was being perceived by many as lack-lustre and life-less – a sense reinforced by the attitudes and expressions of many mainstream politicians. The unprecedented popularity of Pim Fortuijn was a cry for freedom, a cry for straight-talk, a cry to be heard even if what I have to say is politically incorrect.

It was in this atmosphere that the Lijst Pim Fortuijn looked sure of a major success, the current coalition partners looked sure to lose heavily, the CDA (Christian Democrats) looked like it would increase with votes from people desperately seeking solace in this crazy world, and other dissenting voices such as GroenLinks and the Socialist Party were going to gain (all for different reasons, which we will come onto later).

The world looked full of new opportunities, and Professor Pim was the one who was going to unlock the door.

Act Two : May 6th – May 15th

Suddenly the world looked a more frightening place to be. Pim Fortuijn gunned down in cold blood outside the nation's major media centre. The dream of a world full of new opportunities was shattered, as the nation went into shock.

A barrage of criticism was unleashed on the politicians and journalists who had dared to criticise Pim Fortuijn's views. Express-self ways of thinking launched attacks into the sacrifice-self political correctness of "progressive" thinkers, as the less complex of the express-self systems were awakened in the face of these new, more primal life conditions that had arisen. The world is a jungle,

and you have to fight and be tough to survive. No room for softness or tolerance here.

It was an attack which paralysed the more complex kinds of sacrificial thinking, as the aggressor (Fortuijn) had suddenly become the victim, and the goodies (animal rights activists and progressive politics more widely) had suddenly become the aggressors. Echoes of September 11th, where the baddie (USA evil capitalist power) became the victim, and the goodies (oppressed, poverty-ridden tribal peoples) became the aggressors. This is a process that Nietzsche calls "transvaluation of values". The coping mechanisms of the more complex sacrifice-self ways of thinking found themselves to be inadequate to this new level of complexity.

Many who, before the murder, were beginning to dare thinking about voting for Pim Fortuijn and that feeling of freedom, risk and opportunity that he evoked, withdrew into the safety of old, well-trusted ways of coping. The Christian Democrats benefited hugely. The most common sentiments expressed by Christian Democrat voters were security, competency and trust. Here was the protection from the dangerous world out there – Jan Peter Balkenende for Sheriff. Here was a party believed to have clear ideas about Right and Wrong, Law and Order – simplifying a complex world.

Ironically, the Socialist Party benefited from a similar felt need. They seemed to have clear positions, were more forceful in their expressions of their beliefs, and projected again a world of more distinct rights and wrongs.

However, the surge of energy that Pim Fortuijn had released was not just going to go away, and the Lijst Pim Fortuijn (LPF) benefited from that feeling of hope that people could really make a difference and change things. This was reflected in the fact that 30% of LPF voters did not vote in the last elections.

The PvdA (Social Democrats) suffered heavily from the reaction against the sacrificial, consensual way of thinking, which insists on more relative understandings, and therefore does not provide simple rights and wrongs, or universal truths. They were unable to deal with the fact that what Pim Fortuijn was saying (and the way he was saying it), conflicted with their way of thinking (their coping mechanisms), and yet he was very clearly appealing to an important part of the Dutch population. They showed an inability to engage with people's real concerns about security and identity, which were often projected on to the issue of multiculturalism.

GroenLinks (left-leaning Greens) also suffered from these problems, but escaped less bruised, as they were not part of the original governing coalition, and also due to the tinge of radicalism that still surrounds them. D66 (liberal

democrats) were not so fortunate, as they had also been part of the coalition, as well as strongly voicing opposition to Pim Fortuijn and his ideas.

The VVD (economic liberals) were caught in a strange situation. As part of the ruling coalition, they were tainted with the same brush of back-room politics and consensus oppression as their partners, PvdA and D66. Their image to those not fully-versed in their politics was similar. However, their liberal nature is rooted in more express-self ways of thinking, which is what a large part of Dutch society is demanding. They retained their core voters, but lost some voters to the LPF who wanted to see real liberation, and others to the CDA who were in need of a more conservative home to tame the jungle that seemed to be emerging in their country.

Act Three : Post May 15th

So the debates have been raging – in the public domain, as well as behind the scenes in the political parties, especially those now in opposition. On the surface, it looks like a major swing from Left to Right, but if we look at the deeper undercurrents as outlined above, it is clear that the real motivations for voting were very different. In terms of sacrifice-self ways of thinking (represented more by the CDA), and express-self ways of thinking (represented more by LPF and VVD), there is quite a good balance in power. How these systems manage to interact, remained to be seen. For then, this was what the Netherlands needed, and these were the parties who had to do their best to meet the society's needs.

In the meantime, the opposition had some time for reflection – in particular the PvdA and GroenLinks. This is a time of great opportunity. It is in times of crises and stress in a society, that the underlying currents really show themselves, and if they could learn from what had happened, these parties could prepare the ground for the new politics that the Netherlands is clearly asking for.

The main challenge for them is to understand the limits that have been exposed in their current ways of thinking, and to develop a more complex understanding to fit the new life conditions. The centre of gravity in these parties in terms of current ways of thinking came from a reaction against the individualism and exploitation of the industrial worldview. As such, it has liberated oppressed peoples, awakened a sense of responsibility for the environment and other living beings, and challenged materialism to bring a more human face to our societies. It emphasises community and relationships, tolerance, and respect. For all of this, the world should be thankful.

This way of thinking has been active for about 40 years now in western Europe, and has successfully established new coping mechanisms for the life

condition problems that industrialisation and capitalism have created. It has a critical role to play in our society for the coming years, in the transition from mass consumerism and individualism to a more caring and ecologically sustainable society. This is the major transition that this society is currently working on.

And, as is the nature of change, this 40-year old way of thinking is now beginning to face the fruit of the seeds of problems that it planted when it first became active. The problems have been hinted at above. The relativism and pluralism of post-modern thinking, which is a strong part of this way of thinking, is no longer adequate enough to make sense of the emerging life conditions around us. In this way of thinking, everything is deemed to be relative, and there are no universal truths to oppress us – except of course this view itself (that everything is relative), which is the inherent contradiction to this way of thinking. We must tolerate everyone, but if you do not believe in tolerance, then we are not going to tolerate you. So no universal truths, except for the universal truth that there are no universal truths – which is not a relative concept, but is true everywhere. Hmm – something is wrong there...

The events around September 11 and Pim Fortuijn challenged this way of thinking to find its rights and wrongs, to look once more for some sense of truth. For some this means activating old ways of coping, seen in traditional religious beliefs. For others, that is not satisfactory, and the search is on for a more adequate way of making sense of the world. For this latter group, it means a period of stress, confusion and uncertainty, as old coping mechanisms fail to make sense of the new life conditions, and one drifts a little, uncertain of what to believe.

This is a critical stage for individuals and societies. A natural initial reaction is to dig down to previously experienced, less complex ways of coping. This is an important step, and one to be nurtured. It is then important to open up the possibilities for people to make sense of the world in a new and more complex way. This will help people to feel better about the world around them, and enable us all to act more effectively to engage with the complexity of issues we are facing in our world today.

The key point is that relativist and pluralist thinking, whilst importantly demanding equal rights for all, fails to account for different levels of complexity in people's ways of thinking, which are linked to the life conditions they face. Proponents of egalitarianism often confuse equality of being (everyone has a right to be who they are) with equality of thinking (everyone is the same and should be treated equally). People are different, and have a right to be different. And precisely because they are different, they also have a right to be treated differently.

Egalitarianism, in its just fight against oppressive hierarchy (originating initially as a response to the pre-Enlightenment authority of the Church), tends to throw the baby out with the bath-water – denying natural processes of development at the same time. So it does not allow one to distinguish between more or less complex ways of thinking – which are simply natural responses to the different life conditions we are facing – as that is seen as discrimination (an example is the difficulty this way of thinking has in dealing with people from disadvantaged backgrounds whose behaviour can sometimes be intolerant). However, if we believe in honouring difference and diversity, then we *must* discriminate, and not allow one-size-fits-all policies to suffocate the very diversity we are meant to be celebrating³.

We must talk openly and honestly about the different conditions that people face in our society, the different mechanisms that they use to cope with those conditions. We must then design policies for education, healthcare, housing, social inclusion and multiculturalism which meet the deeper needs that exist. In meeting people where they are at, in helping people to cope with the life conditions that are currently their reality, we release the energy for the gentle unfolding of more complex ways of thinking, which in the end will benefit us all.

Act Four: October 16th 2002

The Cabinet resigns, due to major disagreements within the Lijst Pim Fortuijn parliamentary group, their ministers and party. The LPF would gain only four seats according to the latest opinion polls, compared with the 26 they currently hold. The Christian Democrats (CDA) increase their lead, and all the other parties gain a few seats. The latest polls suggest that a coalition between the CDA and VVD would be possible.

The problems within the LPF have never really gone away. There have been constant wranglings, disagreements and resignations. This is not that surprising, if we understand that the party, by the nature of the inheritance left by Pim Fortuijn, tends to attract people with active express-self systems, who have no particular interest in sacrificing their needs for the greater good of the party, but want to get out there and manage things in their own way. The fact that most of them come from a business and entrepreneurship background should therefore also not be surprising. There was clearly not enough sacrifice-self management power within the party to be able to hold the people together.

³ It is important to remember that diversity at this level is not defined by culture, religion, educational status or intelligence – although these all have an influence, diversity in ways of thinking (coping mechanisms) cuts across traditional, more surface, definitions of difference.

What next? Following the regression to safer, less-complex ways of thinking and coping by a large portion of the Dutch voting population, the question was whether they would now stay in that space, return to their pre-Fortuijn ways of thinking, or stretch up to embrace a greater level of complexity due to the shock that the events around Fortuijn have given to their current ways of understanding the world.

The new elections produced a coalition of the Christian Democrats (CDA), Economic Liberals (VVD) and Liberal Democrats (D66) – all fairly conservative in their own way. The CDA represent conservative social values, the VVD represent conservative economic values, and D66 appeals to the old social democracy and consensus culture. The Christian Democrats came out top, with Jan-Peter Balkenende as Prime Minister. Stability is the name of the game.

What is clear, is that there is a space in the Dutch political spectrum for a political party that exudes more express-self thinking, within the compassionate embrace of sacrifice-self thinking - the former without the latter leads to the LPF debacle just witnessed, and the latter without the former leads to the stagnation that the Dutch people were reacting against in the elections in May. This awareness is out there somewhere, the question is whether any of the parties will be able to translate it into real practice.

Act Five : 2nd November 2004

Just when things seemed to be settling down a little again, the shi(f)t hits the fan. Theo van Gogh, film-maker and controversial columnist, is gunned down in broad daylight in the streets of Amsterdam, his throat slit, a message pinned to his chest with a knife. The murderer was a young man with a Islamic fundamentalist background, and Dutch and Moroccan nationality.

In the days that follow, mosques and churches are attacked, an Islamic school is burned to the ground, and tension rises. At the same time a terrorist cell is discovered in the Hague, and rooted out by the elite military counter-terrorist force. It feels like the country is under seige. Foreign news reports on a changing country.

How do the Dutch react? Initially the old Sacrifice-self system of tolerance voices itself from the establishment – we need dialogue, understanding and respect. But unlike last time, around the murder of Fortuijn, this voice is soon drowned out by calls to get real, and understand that dialogue is not enough. A letter by two ministers to the house of commons trying to calm things down is met by strong resistance from others in the house (including from those in their own parties), demanding that protection be provided for those who are being threatened due to their opinions, and that the country come down stronger on fundamentalism. Rapid promises are made to that effect.

This may sound like a regression to a fear-based exclusivity, but the tone is different now. Key leaders are stressing the need to come down hard on fundamentalists of all sorts (be they Islamic or the White Power people who burned down the Islamic school). Halting the influence of the extremes is seen as essential to allow all those in the middle to feel safe and able to get along with each other without fear or suspicion. The country seems to be going beyond seeing diversity as an ideal utopia, to understanding the real challenge of facing it clearly and engaging with it appropriately and adequately. There is increasing acceptance that that may need to involve the use of force and the strong implementation of the rule of law. Gradations of acceptance around diversity are being introduced. Some forms of diversity are more tolerable than other forms. In fact some expressions of beliefs even need to be limited.

There were placards at the demonstration the evening of the murder pointing to the new complexity, e.g. "Do we tolerate intolerance?", and "silence is deathly; speaking out is death; we must never only think".

There have been other signs in recent months of the old Sacrifice-self system of consensus and tolerance breaking down. The trade unions launched a major protest campaign against government reforms of the social security system, when the traditional consensus dialogue process broke down (known as the "Polder Model", in reference to the dikes that keep the water out and the co-operation that was needed to fight the common enemy of the sea). The Polder Model has been a core part of Dutch political life for many years, with the government holding talks with unions to get consensus. Following the union protests this year, the government re-opened secret talks, and a new agreement was reached. One of the union leaders declared as a result that the Polder Model was now dead – they achieved far more as a result of their standing up for what they believed in, rather than coming to some kind of minimum consensus in the dialogue sessions.

It is an exciting time. It is likely to feel quite stressful to many, but is actually bringing a breath of fresh air and honesty into the conversations. New leaders are emerging and old leaders are fading. The murder of Theo van Gogh may have been the straw which broke the camel's back of the old system, and is rapidly making space for the new. It is normal that this is a period of chaos and uncertainty. However, unlike after the Fortuijn murder, it feels like the country is going to transcend the old and embrace higher complexity, rather than regress to the old and known. How well the conservatives currently in power respond, will determine their political future. Meanwhile, there are new leaders who are seeing a new picture, waiting to take over.

Peter Merry
Den Haag, 16th November 2004